Now go, where you want but don't leave me here forever

—"If there's somebody else, he can't love you like me

And he says he'll treat you well, he can't treat you like me."

Michael Jackson - Invincible

Nut's childhood was happy and peaceful.

He would say this later—to friends—and the sentence would be true. Genuinely true. Not a lie. Not a performance.

His mother had him young. Nineteen. A girl, really—a girl who became a woman in the space between the pregnancy test and the delivery room, the transformation happening not gradually but suddenly, the way a chemical reaction happened, the elements combining and producing something new and irreversible. She was built for it. Not in the reductive, biological sense—She had a natural, instinctive fluency for care, the way some people had a fluency for music or language. She knew when he was hungry before he cried. She knew when he was tired before he yawned. She filled every room she entered with a warmth that was not performed but radiated, the way a candle radiated light—not because it chose to, but because that was what it was.

His father was already an adult. Twenty-six. A medical student. His father dreamed of becoming a surgeon. The dream was achieved—quickly, efficiently. He became a surgeon. He found a job. He built a career. He climbed the ladder with the steady, mechanical, upward motion of a person who had been climbing since childhood and did not know how to stop.

A father who did not come home.

And when he did come home, came home late. Came home tired. Came home carrying the specific, residual, antiseptic-scented exhaustion of a man who had spent his day inside other people's bodies and had nothing left for the people in his own.

Nut remembered sitting at the kitchen table. Eight years old. Homework spread in front of him. His mother beside him, helping with the math—patient, warm, her hand on his back, the touch constant, grounding. The front door opening. His father's shoes in the hallway. The sound of a bag being set down. The footsteps—not hurried, not eager, not the footsteps of a person coming home to something, but the footsteps of a person arriving at a place to sleep.

His father appeared in the kitchen doorway.

"How was school?" his father asked.

"Good," Nut said.

"Good," his father said.

That was the conversation. The entire conversation. The exchange of two goods that communicated nothing except the continued existence of both parties. His father looked at him. His father's eyes moved across Nut's face the way they might move across a patient chart—checking for abnormalities, confirming vital signs, registering the data without processing the person.

His father did not see him.

He never saw him.

And his mother stayed home, being his sweet mother who made sure he never noticed his father's absence. She filled the space—the space at the dinner table, the space at the school events, the space in the bedtime routine where a father's voice should have been reading the story but wasn't.

She almost succeeded.

He almost didn't notice.

Almost.

Nut grew up under his mother's wing. Under the absent gaze of a father who came home and looked at him and did not see him and went to bed and woke up and left and came home and looked and did not see—the cycle repeating with the mechanical, impersonal regularity of a medical schedule, the family's emotional life organized around shift rotations and on-call nights and the specific, institutional rhythm of a hospital that owned his father more completely than any marriage ever could.

His life was average. He played sports—basketball, swimming, the physical activities that burned energy and built muscle and filled the after-school hours with something that was not silence and not the empty chair at the dinner table. He read books. He drew. He was a good boy—the adjective that adults used for children who did not cause problems, who did not require intervention, who existed in the smooth, frictionless center of the behavioral spectrum and whose goodness was, therefore, both genuine and invisible. The goodness of a person who was easy to overlook because he never demanded to be looked at.

But he never achieved what other boys did.

The other boys—his classmates, his teammates—the other boys developed crushes on girls. At fifteen, the crushes arrived like a weather system—suddenly,

overwhelmingly, the hormonal front that swept through every classroom and every hallway and converted every interaction between boys and girls into a charged, awkward, electrifying negotiation of desire.

The boys eyed the girls from other schools. The boys talked about them—analyzed them, ranked them, discussed them with the detailed, obsessive, breathless intensity that adolescence brought to everything it touched.

Nut's body discovered the same thing. At the same time. With the same hormonal urgency and the same obsessive, detailed, overwhelming intensity.

Except Nut's body discovered it about Hong.

Hong arrived at the all-boys school the way a storm arrived—not gradually, not politely, but fully formed and impossible to ignore.

He was younger. A year younger. Smaller. Skinnier. With dark hair that fell into his eyes and a mouth that was always either talking or preparing to talk and an energy that was too much for the classroom and too much for the hallway and too much for the quiet, disciplined, expectation-heavy institution that his parents had chosen specifically to contain him.

Hong complained about the food. Hong complained about the homework. Hong was sarcastic and funny and loud and overly sentimental and everything that the school's culture told boys not to be.

Nut fell completely in love with him.

Not gradually. Not cautiously. He fell the way you fell from a height—suddenly, completely, the ground disappearing, the air rushing, the impact inevitable.

Hong was everything he wanted. Not because Hong was perfect—Hong was the opposite of perfect, Hong was chaos and noise and the kind of vulnerability that made Nut's chest ache—but because Hong was real. In a life where Nut's father looked at him and did not see him, Hong looked at him and saw everything.

"You're staring," Hong said once. Early. Before anything had started. They were in the library. Nut had been watching Hong read—watching the way Hong's forehead creased when he concentrated, the way his lips moved slightly, forming the words without speaking them.

"Sorry," Nut said.

It started there. In the library. In the silence between an observation and an invitation.

Hong was his first romantic partner. His first sexual experience. His first heartbreak. His first everything—the word first attaching itself to Hong the way a tattoo attached itself to skin, permanent, specific, the mark of a person who had been there before anyone else and whose presence had changed the surface forever.

They had a year. One year. Twelve months of stolen moments and hidden stairwells and a rooftop that only Nut knew about, where they sat close enough to touch and where Hong's hand found his and where the world, for the first time, felt like a place that had been designed for Nut rather than around him.

"My parents would kill me." Hong said one evening on that rooftop, and Nut heard the fear in his voice and held his hand tighter.

"Then we're careful," Nut said. "And whatever happens—we're careful together."

He meant it. He meant every word. He would have been careful forever. He would have hidden forever. He would have existed in the margins of Hong's life for the rest of his life, if the margins were the only space available, because the margins with Hong were better than the center of anything else.

He was sixteen when his world fell apart.

The falling apart happened in layers—not all at once, not in a single catastrophic event, but in a sequence, each layer peeling away to reveal the next, each revelation worse than the last. His father found a better job. In Korea. The announcement was made at dinner—the dinner table, the same dinner table where two goods had been exchanged for sixteen years, the table that had never held a real conversation and was now holding the most consequential one.

His mother said nothing. His mother's silence was not the silence of agreement. It was the silence of a woman who had already made her own decision and was waiting for the right moment to deliver it.

The moment came three weeks later.

His mother got tired. The tired was not physical—not the exhaustion of a woman who had been raising a child for sixteen years without help. The tired was existential. She got tired of the absence, the trajectory, the career that was always more important than the kitchen and the garden and the bedtime stories and the hand on the forehead checking for fever—the career that had taken her husband's presence the way surgery took a tumor, completely, cleanly, leaving nothing behind.

She filed for divorce.

Then she told him the truth.

They were in the kitchen. The kitchen that smelled of the lemongrass she grew in the garden. The kitchen where she had helped him with homework and fed him and filled the empty chair with enough love to make it almost invisible. She sat across from him. Her hands were folded on the table—the hands that had touched his forehead a thousand times, the hands that knew his temperature better than any thermometer.

"I love someone else." she said. The sentence was simple. The simplest sentence she had ever spoken and the most devastating. "I'm pregnant."

Two more words. The count was climbing.

"I'm leaving."

Two more.

Nine words total. The demolition of his family in nine words, delivered in the kitchen that smelled of lemongrass, by the woman who had been his entire world.

He could never judge her. He could never judge her because he understood. He understood what it meant to love someone so completely that the loving reorganized your entire life. If Hong had asked him to run away—if Hong had said come with me, leave everything—Nut would have gone. Without hesitation. Without looking back.

His mother loved someone else the way Nut loved Hong—with the full, devastating, reality-restructuring force of a feeling that was bigger than the life it was contained in.

She left. For Indonesia. For the someone else. For the new baby who would be born into a family that had presence rather than absence.

He stayed. With his aunt. His father's youngest sister—young herself, only twenty-four, barely an adult, a woman who had not planned to raise a teenager and who did it anyway, imperfectly, lovingly, with purple hair and too-loud music and the specific, chaotic, generous warmth of a person who didn't know the rules and therefore couldn't enforce them.

He never said anything to Hong. About the divorce. About his mother. About the fact that his family had dissolved around him while he was standing inside it. Because he was still happy. He still had Hong. And as long as he had Hong, the rest was manageable—the rest was the blank corner of the painting, the dark room in the house, the thing that was absent but not fatal.

And then Hong left.

No warning. No goodbye. No final conversation on the rooftop where the sky turned purple and the city spread beneath them and the world felt possible. Hong was

simply gone. The desk in the classroom was empty. The stairwell was empty. The rooftop was empty.

Gone.

His aunt dyed her hair purple. Then blue. Then a color that was somewhere between the two and that she called "midnight" and that Nut called "ridiculous" and that made her laugh—the laugh that was too loud for her apartment and too bright for the grief that lived in it, the laugh of a woman who was determined to prove that joy was possible even when everything suggested otherwise.

She took him to illustration fairs at the university. The fairs were a revelation. The world was full of people who drew. Who painted. Who sculpted and tattooed and illustrated and made things with their hands—not for grades, not for careers, not for the clinical, efficient, return-on-investment calculus that had governed his father's life, but for the simple, irrational, beautiful reason that making things was how they understood the world.

The fairs were full of people with colorful hair like his aunt. People with piercings. People with tattoos—real tattoos, the kind that Nut had been drawing on paper and was now seeing on skin, the designs alive on bodies, moving with the bodies, becoming part of the bodies in a way that paper could never replicate.

He stared. He stared at the tattoos the way he had stared at Hong in the library—with the full, focused, unself-conscious attention of a person who had found the thing they were looking for and hadn't known they were looking for it.

"You should learn," his aunt said, following his gaze to a tattoo artist's booth where a man was inking a chrysanthemum onto a woman's shoulder blade.

"I can't—"

"You draw better than half the people here. And you understand bodies." She paused. "You got that from your dad, actually. The anatomy thing. He sees bodies as things to fix. You see them as things to decorate. Same skill. Different application."

The sentence was the most insightful thing anyone had ever said about him and his father. He filed it. He kept it. He carried it the way he would later carry the small things that proved the world was paying attention.

He waited for a message that never came. Hong did not text. Hong did not call. Hong did not send a message through a friend or a classmate or the stairwell's ghost.

Hong was gone.

He waited. He drew. He went to the fairs with his aunt. He graduated. He went to university—art school, the kind of school his father would have considered frivolous and his mother would have considered beautiful, the choice made in the absence of both and therefore entirely his own.

He kept waiting.

The waiting was not passive. The waiting was not sitting by a phone. The waiting was active—it was the drawing, the studying, the learning of anatomy and design and the thousand small skills that would eventually make him the artist he became. The waiting was building something while the thing he wanted was missing. The waiting was living while the life felt incomplete.

And he met Lego.

Lego, who invited them with his smile and his happiness to his show—an aerial performance, a small venue, the kind of show that drew a crowd of fifty rather than five thousand.

Lego's voice on the phone—because by then they had exchanged numbers, through Tui, through the circle, through the overlapping networks that connected alternative artists and alternative performers in a city of twelve million—Lego's voice was bright and warm and musical and carried the specific, infectious, impossible-to-resist quality of a person who was asking you to come see him do the thing he loved most.

"You should come," Lego had said. "There are other performers too. It's going to be beautiful."

The emotion in the boy's voice convinced him. The brightness. The warmth. The specific, unguarded, full-hearted enthusiasm of a person who loved something and wanted to share the loving.

He went.

Lego on the aerial lyra was beautiful. The body curved and held and released, the metal hoop spinning slowly, the light catching the sequins on his costume—black and pink, the colors that Lego wore like a declaration—and the music was soft, and the audience was quiet, and the moment was the kind of moment that existed outside of time, the kind that you watched and knew, while watching, that you would remember it forever.

After the show, he went outside. The venue was small. The air was cool. The river was somewhere nearby—he could smell it, the wet, mineral scent of moving water.

He turned.

Hong.

An adult Hong. A changed Hong. With gray hair—defiant, the color of rebellion—and piercings, and eyeliner, and the smell of cigarettes that hid an expensive perfume underneath. But the eyes were the same. The dark eyes. The eyes that had looked at him in a library and said I didn't say stop.

Everything he missed. Everything he loved at fifteen.

And his heart began to beat again. Not metaphorically—literally, physically, the organ in his chest accelerating, the blood moving faster, the capillaries dilating, the skin flushing. He felt butterflies in his stomach again—the same butterflies, the exact same ones, as if they had been dormant for six years and were now waking up.

The person who had been with him for all his firsts. The first love. The first kiss. The first everything.

He was there.

"Hong."

One word. The name. Spoken in a voice that he barely controlled—the voice wanting to say everything, the discipline forcing it to say only this.

Hong looked at him. The gray hair. The piercings. The armor. And beneath the armor, the same boy—the same sentimental, noisy, too-much boy who cried at movies and held hands on rooftops and who had been taken away without warning and without goodbye.

"Nut," Hong said. And smiled. The genuine smile. The one that Nut had seen a thousand times and had not seen for six years and that arrived now, in the cool air outside a small venue by the river, and that felt like the sun coming out after the longest night in history.

And Nut didn't say anything else. He didn't say I waited for you. He didn't say for six years. He didn't say where did you go or why didn't you call or do you know what it was like, the empty rooftop, the empty stairwell, the empty desk. He didn't confess. He didn't cry.

He just stayed.

And the staying said everything.

Nut's apartment was on the first floor of a five-story building. There was no elevator.

The apartment was open-plan, industrial-style, two floors—the ground level and a mezzanine, connected by a metal staircase that was steep and narrow and produced a satisfying, industrial clang with each step.

From the upper floor—the mezzanine, the private level—you could look down and see the entirety of the ground floor spread beneath you like a map of Nut's life: the tattoo studio on one side, with its medical-grade hydraulic chair and its framed anatomical sketches and its smell of green soap and expensive incense; the sofa in the middle, the gathering point, the place where his people sat and ate and talked; the kitchen on the other side, with the espresso machine and the protein drinks and the high-quality cookware that Nut used with the same precision he applied to his tattoo work.

Downstairs was the public life. The studio. The art.

Upstairs was the private life. The bedroom. The cozy, unexpected warmth of a space that contradicted the industrial aesthetic—the large bookshelf where, hidden behind heavy art books, was a collection of Moomin plushies. The pull-up bar in the doorway. The dumbbells. The bed.

And the ceiling held a secret. Steel structures. Circus rigging. The specific, industrial-grade, weight-rated hardware that supported aerial apparatus—the silks, the hoop, the equipment that Lego used for practice. Nut had installed them himself. He had studied the ceiling's load-bearing capacity. He had consulted with a structural engineer—a friend of Tui's, a man who built things for a living and who had looked at Nut's ceiling and his plans and had said: "This will hold a car. Your friend will be fine."

The ceiling was the thing Nut looked at when he couldn't sleep. The steel structures visible in the dim light—the rigging that he'd built for someone else, the infrastructure of care made physical, the love that he'd welded into the architecture because welding was easier than saying.

He stared at his phone.

Sunday morning. The apartment was quiet. The studio was closed—no clients today, no sessions, just the hum of the refrigerator and the distant sound of the city outside.

He wondered why he hadn't called. He wondered why he hadn't called Hong—not today, not this week, not in the six years between Hong's disappearance and Hong's return. The years when Nut had waited and drawn and gone to fairs with his aunt and built a life that was complete except for the one blank corner.

The answer was complicated.

He wanted to say: I waited for you. For six years. I waited. I drew. I learned anatomy.

I learned to tattoo. I built a studio. I installed rigging in my ceiling for a boy I met later who reminded me, in his brightness, of what joy looked like. I waited, and the waiting was not passive—the waiting was the building of everything I am, and everything I am was built in the space you left.

He said none of these things.

He stared at the ceiling. He stared at his phone. He wondered.

He took a nap.

When he woke up, it was already one in the afternoon. The light had shifted—the morning light replaced by the harder, flatter light of early afternoon, the light that was less forgiving and more honest.

William was coming today. William, who had been acting strange since the party—the party where Hong had arrived with Est, the model, the International Darling. William, who had been quieter than usual, more withdrawn, the shyness not its normal, manageable baseline but something deeper, something that Nut recognized because he had lived inside it—the withdrawal of a person carrying something they couldn't put down and couldn't show anyone.

He was, if he was honest, jealous. Not of William. Of Hong. Jealous that Hong let someone in so easily—that Hong could meet a stranger at a company party and, within hours, share a wristband and a warehouse and a fire and a night. Jealous of the ease. The fluidity. The way Hong moved through social space as if the walls that Nut spent years building simply didn't exist for him.

But he had no right to anything. The jealousy was his. The right was not.

The door to his room opened.

Lego was there.

The other boys were supposed to come later, but since Lego had a key to his apartment, he used to come and go whenever he wanted—the key a gift, a trust, a small piece of metal that said this space is yours too.

Nut had given it to him a year ago, after the third time Lego had shown up unannounced and had to wait on the doorstep because Nut was in the middle of a tattoo session. The waiting had bothered Nut more than it bothered Lego—the image of Lego sitting on the steps, cross-legged, scrolling his phone, existing in the hallway instead of inside where he belonged.

"Here," Nut had said, pressing the key into Lego's palm. "So you stop sitting on my doorstep like a stray cat."

"I'm not a stray cat." Lego had said.

"You're a stray cat with platform boots."

"That's the best kind of stray cat."

Now Lego stood in the doorway. He wasn't wearing makeup, and his hair was in two braids—long, black, the braids resting over his shoulders, making him look younger, softer, the face without the armor of cosmetics revealed in its natural state. His eyes were brown—the contacts out, the honest color. He smelled of sweet perfume—a scent that was floral and warm and slightly sugary, the olfactory equivalent of his personality: bright, sweet, present.

He was wearing sweatpants—gray, soft, the casual, off-duty clothes of a person who was not performing today. A tight t-shirt. Black. The kind that showed the lean, functional, aerialist's body—the muscles visible, the arms defined, the torso compact. No socks. Bare feet on the industrial floor.

"Hi." Lego said.

"Hi." Nut said back.

Lego jumped on him in bed. The impact was light—Lego was small, and the jump was more of a controlled fall, the body arranging itself on top of Nut's with the practiced ease of a person who had been jumping on this specific person in this specific bed enough times to know exactly where to land.

Nut grunted. "You weigh more than you look."

"That's muscle, P'Nut. Respect the muscle."

"I respect the muscle. The muscle doesn't respect my ribs."

Lego settled. His head found its usual spot—the curve between Nut's shoulder and chest, the place that seemed to have been designed specifically for Lego's skull. The braids spread across Nut's shirt.

"William has a session today," Nut said after a while, his hand finding its way to one of the braids—not pulling, not tugging, just holding, the braid resting in his palm like a rope of silk. "He's been having more sessions lately."

"Is that unusual?"

"He started the tattoo eight months ago. We did three sessions in the first six months. He's booked three more in the last two weeks."

"Maybe he wants to finish it."

"Maybe." Nut paused. He didn't know how to say the next thing without saying too much. It was private. It was William's. "Or maybe he wants something else."

"Maybe he wants to spend time with you." Lego said.

Nut laughed. The short, quiet laugh. "He just wants a distraction."

"From what?"

Nut didn't answer. The answer was William's to give.

Lego didn't push. He pressed his face closer to Nut's chest and breathed. The breath was warm.

The air in Nut's studio smelled like green soap and sandalwood incense, the same way it always smelled—the scent of care, of precision, of a space that was both clinical and sacred. The tattoo machine hummed. The needle bit. William exhaled. The pain was manageable. Not pleasant, not comfortable, but manageable.

The pain was easier to think about than the other thing. The pain was simpler. The pain had a source—the needle—and a purpose—the art—and an end—the session's conclusion. The pain was linear. The other thing was not linear. The other thing was Est.

"You're tense, Will."

Nut's voice was low. A gloved hand wiped away excess ink—the touch steady, controlled, the hands of a man who treated skin the way a surgeon treated tissue, with the understanding that the thing being touched was not a surface but a person.

"Your skin is fighting the needle. You're vibrating."

Nut paused. The machine's hum dropped as he lifted it slightly, reducing the contact.

Every time William closed his eyes, he saw Est. Est's face in the firelight. Est's dark eyes. Est's mouth. The taste of olives and vodka and something sweeter.

"Let's take a break." Nut said.

William heard the snap of gloves being removed. The click of the machine being set down. The creak of Nut's stool as he stood and stretched—the stretch of a large man in a small space, the arms extending, the shoulders rolling, the body recalibrating after an hour of focused, precise, stationary work.

William lifted his head from the cradle. Slowly. The blood that had been pooling in his face while he was prone redistributed, the lightheadedness brief, the world tilting for a second before settling into its correct orientation.

He turned his face toward the room.

The studio was the same. Always the same. The anatomical sketches on the walls. The incense burning. The hydraulic chair beneath him, the leather warm where his body had been.

Tui was in the kitchen. He'd arrived while Nut was working—quietly, the way Tui arrived everywhere, materializing with two bags of groceries and a basil plant and the specific, unhurried calm of a man who believed that feeding people was a form of love and who practiced his faith with religious consistency.

Tui turned from the counter. His eyes found William across the room—the photographer's eyes, the eyes that saw past the surface and into the structure.

"He's hiding something, Nut." Tui said. His voice was casual. Too casual. The casualness of a person who had identified something and was choosing the gentlest possible way to address it. "So, Will." Tui moved closer, hovering over him. "Tell us. How was the after-party?"

William's grip tightened on the edge of the hydraulic chair. The leather creaked under his fingers—the sound small, intimate, audible only to him.

He could feel both of them. Nut at the sink, washing the tattoo equipment with the meticulous, thorough attention of a man whose father was a surgeon. Tui in the doorframe, arms crossed, the posture relaxed but the eyes sharp.

The two anchors. The two protectors. The two people in the group who exchanged the look—the we need to talk about William look that they thought he didn't notice but that he always noticed, because William noticed everything, because noticing was his primary skill and his primary curse.

"Nothing happened." William said. The words came out too quickly. The speed of a person who had rehearsed the sentence and was now delivering it before the rehearsal could be questioned. "I just left Est at home and went away."

"Okay." Tui said.

The single word carrying the weight of I know you're lying and I'm not going to force it but I want you to know that I know.

"What about you?" William asked. He directed the question at Tui—specifically at Tui, because Tui was the one pressing, and pressing back was the only defense William had that wasn't a lie. "Didn't you go home with Lego?"

"We all went to Lego's apartment together," Tui said. His voice was careful—the same careful that William recognized in himself. The careful of a person managing a narrative. The we all doing the heavy lifting.

"Hong was too drunk." Nut added from the sink.

"And Lego hates being alone." Tui said.

"I stayed and cooked in the morning." Tui finished.

The explanation was clean. Complete. Containing no lies and no truths that mattered.

William sipped his coffee during the break and looked at them.

He could see it. The photographer's eye—the eye his grandmother had recognized before he understood it himself—the eye that saw the things people tried to hide.

He could see Nut's love for Hong. It lived in the way Nut's hands moved when Hong's name was mentioned—a slight tension, a micro-adjustment, the fingers tightening around whatever they were holding, the body's unconscious response to a stimulus it could not control. The careful, steady, disciplined love of a man who had waited six years and was still waiting, who had built circus rigging into his ceiling for someone else because building was easier than confessing.

He could see Tui's love for Lego. It lived in the avoidance—in the way Tui said we all went to Lego's apartment instead of I went to Lego's apartment. In the basil plant he'd brought from his own balcony because Lego's apartment needed something alive. In the cooking. In the careful, patient, protective warmth of a man who was terrified of temporary things because he had lost his sister and knew what it meant when the world took someone away.

He could see Hong's armor. The sarcasm, the leather, the gray hair, the grunge aesthetic—all of it a construction, a costume, the elaborate, carefully maintained exterior of a person who was terrified of being compared and found wanting. The boy who cried at movies hiding inside the man who wore eyeliner and smoked cigarettes and said cutting things and apologized immediately because the cutting hurt him more than it hurt anyone else.

And Est.

Est was the one William couldn't see. Est's layers were professional—installed by an industry that had spent six years teaching him to present surfaces that were flawless and impenetrable and beautiful and empty. Est's armor was not a construction; it was a career. The glass wall was not a choice; it was a job requirement.

The truth was William had wanted to stay. In the apartment with the charcoal linens and the perfume shelf and the crystal jar of small, overlooked objects. He had wanted to stay and watch Est sleep and be there when Est woke up and say good morning and mean it the way you meant it when you said it to someone who

mattered.

And the truth was he had left anyway, because leaving was what William knew how to do.

"Can I ask you something?" William said.

Nut looked up from his equipment. Tui looked up from his phone. The studio waited—the incense burning, the green soap scenting the air, the silence the specific, holding silence of two people who were ready to listen.

"Have you ever—" William stopped. Started again. The words moving like the shutter on his grandmother's Leica—slowly, deliberately, each one a choice. "Have you ever seen something. Through the lens. Something you knew was important. And instead of shooting it, you—"

He paused.

"You put the camera down," he said quietly. "Because you were afraid the photo would be too honest."

The studio was very quiet.

"Every time I pick up the camera," Tui said. His voice was different—lower, rougher, the gravel showing. "Every single time. I see the shot. I know it's good. I know it's true. And then I think—if I take this photo, I can't un-take it. If I capture this moment, it exists forever. And if it exists, I have to deal with what it means."

He looked at William. The look was steady—the photographer's look, the look that saw past the surface and into the bones.

"Is this about a photo, Will?" Tui asked. "Or about a person?"

"Both," William said. "Neither. I don't know."

"William," Nut said. His voice was the voice he used when he was about to put needle to skin—calm, certain, the voice that said this is going to hurt and I'm going to be here for all of it. "You don't have to tell us anything you're not ready to tell us."

The permission. The space. The specific, Nut-shaped gift of being allowed to be silent and being loved anyway.

"I met someone," William said. "At the party."

He didn't say the name. He didn't need to. The name was in the room already—had been in the room since Hong mentioned it, since Lego discussed the rumors, since the viral photo had entered their collective consciousness and rearranged the architecture of their group.

William closed his eyes. The darkness behind his lids was not dark—it was Est. Est's face in the lamplight of his apartment. Est's hands reaching for him. Est's fingers finding the edge of the tattoo and tracing it—back and forth, back and forth, the fingertip following the boundary between the inked skin and the blank skin, between the story that had been written and the story that was still waiting.

"I slept with him." William said. The sentence fell into the studio. Small. Enormous. The size of a confession. "And then I left," William said. "In the morning. Before he woke up."

The silence that followed was not empty. It was full—full of Nut's steady breathing and Tui's careful stillness and the incense smoke curling toward the ceiling and the specific, charged, intimate quality of a room where someone had just told the truth.

They already knew. Deep down, they already knew—the signs were there, readable to anyone who paid attention, and Nut and Tui were people who paid attention the way other people paid rent, consistently, thoroughly, as a condition of existence.

But hearing it from William's mouth was different.

"I'm not—" William's voice cracked. The crack was small. He repaired it. Tried again. "I'm a photography student with a secondhand camera and a chalkboard with everyone's coffee orders. And he's—he's on billboards. He's on campaigns. He's the kind of person who has a hundred perfumes organized by mood and who sleeps on sheets that cost more than my rent."

"Will—" Tui started.

"He's probably been with people who don't check their skin in the mirror every morning." The words were coming faster now—the dam breaking, the water finding the path, the confession becoming a flood. "People who don't have an unfinished tattoo they're too scared to show anyone. People who are—whole. Complete. Not—"

"Not what?" Nut said. Quietly. The quiet of a needle hovering over skin—present, steady, waiting.

"Not broken." William whispered.

The word landed on the studio floor like a dropped glass—the sound of something shattering, the fragments spreading. Nut stood. He crossed the studio in three steps —He put his hand on William's shoulder. The bare shoulder—the skin still tender from the tattoo session, the fresh lines covered in healing ointment.

"There is nothing broken about you." Nut's voice was low. Fierce. "Your body is not broken. Your skin is not broken. The things you carry—the things you think are flaws —those are not breaks. Those are textures. Those are the places where the history shows through." He paused. "Like tattoos."

The word hung in the air. The word that Nut used for everything—for art, for identity, for the permanent marks that people chose to carry because the carrying made them more themselves rather than less.

"And the person who traces your tattoo in the dark and wants to know the story—"

Nut's hand tightened on William's shoulder. Not painfully. Firmly. The grip of a person who was holding something steady because the something was shaking.

"That person is not looking for perfection, Will. That person is looking for you."

The studio held them. The incense burned. Tui was still—perfectly still, the stillness of a person who was witnessing something important and knew that the most helpful thing he could do was exist, quietly, as proof that William was not alone.

Nut patched William's back. The ointment was cool. The bandage was precise—applied with the same clinical, careful, surgeon's-son attention that Nut brought to everything, the care not an effort but a reflex.

"Session's done," Nut said. His voice was normal again—steady, warm, the serious face softened by the smile that changed everything. "You did good."

William sat up. Slowly. The world righted itself.

"Lego knows something is wrong?" William asked.

"Yes," the boys said at the same time.

The synchronicity was not rehearsed. It was the natural, inevitable result of two people who had been watching the same situation and had reached the same conclusion.

"Is Lego going to ask me questions?"

"Probably," Tui said.

"Is he going to make me answer them?"

"Definitely," Nut said.

William groaned. The groan was theatrical—the performance of exasperation by a person who was actually, underneath the performance, deeply grateful for the persistence of people who refused to let him disappear.

Nut laughed—the short, quiet laugh that always surprised people because his face was so serious. The laugh that Nut had given Hong three times at a party and that Hong had, apparently, told him he loved.

"Lego is relentless," Nut agreed. "But he means well. He just can't help wanting to

know everything about everyone."

"It's not curiosity," Tui added. "It's care. He just doesn't know any other way to care except by knowing."

"He's going to figure it out." William said.

"Figure what out?" Tui asked. Innocent. Too innocent. The innocence of a person who had already figured it out and was giving William the courtesy of pretending otherwise.

William lifted his head again. Looked at them both—Nut with his steady, kind eyes, the eyes that had waited six years for a person and had never complained about the waiting; Tui with his knowing, patient ones, the eyes that photographed the truth even when the truth was uncomfortable.

Maybe he could tell them. Maybe the telling wouldn't break anything. Maybe the telling would be like the tattoo—painful, yes, but purposeful. Permanent. The mark of a choice rather than a wound.

"Thank you," William said.

"For what?" Nut asked.

"For not letting me disappear."

When the boys left—William pulling on his shirt carefully over the fresh bandage, Tui carrying the leftover food in containers he'd brought from home because Tui always brought containers, because Tui believed in preparation the way other people believed in God—the apartment fell silent.

The silence was the specific silence of a space that had recently held four people and now held one. The sofa still warm. The coffee cups still on the table. The studio still smelling of green soap and the faint, metallic tang of ink.

Nut stood in the kitchen. He washed the cups. He dried them. He placed them on the shelf—precisely, aligned, the cups in their designated positions because order was not a preference but a need, the need of a man who had grown up in a house where the only order was his mother's love and the disorder was everything else.

He heard Lego's footsteps on the stairs.

Not the platform boots—the bare feet, quiet, the steps of a person who was trying to be silent and almost succeeding. Almost. The old metal staircase betrayed him—a soft clang, then another, the rhythm of a small body descending carefully.

"You love eavesdropping." Nut said. He didn't turn around. He didn't need to. He

knew the sound of Lego on his stairs the way he knew the sound of his own breathing.

Lego appeared at the bottom of the staircase. He sat on the lowest step. He looked small—the braids over his shoulders, the bare feet on the metal, the body curled in on itself, the knees drawn up, the platform boots absent and the height they provided absent with them, revealing the actual size of a person who spent his life appearing larger than he was.

"Sorry," he said. The voice was quiet. Not the bright, musical voice. The underneath voice. The one that existed below the performance.

Nut dried the last cup. Set it on the shelf. Turned.

Lego on the stairs. Small. Brown eyes. No makeup. The braids. The tight black t-shirt. The gray sweatpants. He looked like a child. He looked like the eighteen-year-old Nut had first met—young, bright, afraid of being alone, wearing the fear like a costume and calling it fashion.

Nut crossed the room. He knelt in front of the stairs—the kneel of a large man making himself smaller, bringing himself to the level of the person who needed him.

He stroked Lego's face. Gently. The way his mother had touched his forehead when he was a child—the touch that checked for fever and communicated love simultaneously, the touch that said I am here and I am paying attention and you are not alone.

"William looked better," Nut said. "Don't worry."

Lego looked at him. The brown eyes. The honest eyes. The eyes that read people through touch and through looking and through the specific, uncanny, almost supernatural empathy of a person who felt other people's pain as if it were his own.

He nodded. Small. The nod of a person who wanted to believe and was trying.

"P'Nut," Lego said.

"Hm?"

"William's in love."

"Yeah." Nut said.

The word was simple. The word carried the weight of a man who understood love—who had loved at fifteen and lost at fifteen and waited for six years and found the person again and still hadn't said the words, who understood that love was not always the bright, musical, sweet-scented thing that Lego's perfume suggested but was sometimes the quiet, structural, load-bearing thing that held a building up

without being visible.

"Yeah," he said again. "He is."

Lego thought of William. Of the words he'd overheard through the studio door—the words that had traveled through the walls the way sound traveled through Nut's industrial apartment, through the metal and the concrete, the confession arriving at Lego's ears the way confessions arrived at the ears of people who were listening even when they weren't supposed to be.

I'm not enough. I'm broken.

Lego's eyes welled with tears.

He knew those words. He knew what it meant to believe you were broken—to look in the mirror and see the cracks, to carry the weight of a loneliness that no amount of brightness could fully conceal, to be the person who kept every birthday card and every note because the cards and the notes were proof that someone had seen you and the proof was necessary because, without it, you might forget that you were visible.

And he knew that knowing wasn't the same as being able to help. The knowing was the easy part. The helping was the hard part—the part that required not just empathy but action, not just feeling but doing, not just the reading of pain but the response to it.

"Don't cry," Nut said. His thumb moved across Lego's cheek—catching the first tear, the gesture automatic, the tenderness of a person who had been catching things for other people his entire life.

"I'm sorry," Lego said. But the tears fell anyway—the tears that arrived without permission and without apology, the same tears that Hong had been mocked for as a child and that Lego wore without shame.

"I don't want him to feel that way," Lego whispered. "I don't want him to think he's broken. He's not broken, P'Nut. He's one of the most beautiful people I know. And not because of his skin or his camera or—he's beautiful because he sees things. He sees the things no one else notices. He photographs the stray hair and the scar and the expression people make when they think no one is looking. He keeps our coffee orders on a chalkboard. He remembers the exact date we all met. He—"

The tears fell faster. Lego's voice broke. The break was not the performative break of a person seeking comfort—it was the genuine, involuntary fracture of a person whose heart was too big for their body and who could not witness pain without absorbing it.

Nut pulled him off the stairs.

Simply. The way you picked up something precious. His arms went around Lego—fully, completely, the hug not a gesture but an environment, the body of a man who spent his days lifting weights and his nights holding people, the strength used not for display but for containment, the holding of a person who was falling apart.

Lego pressed his face into Nut's chest. The tears soaked through Nut's shirt. The strawberry scent mixed with the sandalwood and the green soap, the three smells combining into something that was theirs—the smell of this apartment, this friendship, this life they had built together from the wreckage of their separate childhoods.

"He's going to be okay," Nut said. The words were spoken into Lego's hair—into the braids, into the black strands, the words traveling from his mouth to Lego's scalp to Lego's brain. "We're going to make sure he's okay."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Lego's arms tightened around Nut's waist. The grip was fierce—the grip of a person who used touch as language and was currently saying, in the vocabulary of pressure and warmth: don't let go, don't let go, don't let go.

Nut didn't let go.

He held Lego on the studio floor, in the afternoon light, in the smell of green soap and incense and strawberry, and he thought about William—sweet, shy, kind, brave William, who believed he was broken because a town had told him so and because the believing had become a habit and habits were harder to break than bones.

And he thought about Hong. About the gray hair and the piercings and the genuine smile that was rare enough to function as currency. About the six years of waiting and the rooftop and the hand that had held his when they were fifteen and sixteen and the world was possible.

And he thought about Est—the stranger he barely knew, the model with the turtleneck and the hundred perfumes, the person who William had fallen for and who might, if the universe was occasionally kind, be falling too.

And he thought about Lego. The boy in his arms. The brightness. The tears. The heart that was too big and the body that was too small and the combination that made him the most courageous person Nut had ever known.

"Cutie," Nut said softly. The nickname. The real one. The one that was not a joke but a truth.

Lego sniffed. "Don't call me that when I'm crying. It makes it worse."

"Cutie pie."

"P'Nut."

"Sorry. You're right. You're very tough and scary."

"I am tough and scary."

"You're crying into my shirt."

"Tough people cry."

"They do," Nut agreed. "They absolutely do."

And he held him. And the afternoon light moved across the floor. And the studio kept its silence—the green soap, the incense, the steel structures in the ceiling that held the weight of a person who flew, built by the hands of a person who stayed on the ground and watched and waited and loved without saying.